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Time will tell if \$177M from settlement will be enough to clean Asarco's mess

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When Asarco exited Montana Wednesday — the result of a \$3.5 billion nationwide settlement deal — it left behind thousands of acres of contaminated land and water and \$177 million to clean it up.

No one knows if the money will be enough to remove the lead, arsenic, cadmium, selenium and a host of other heavy metals and toxins above and below the ground at five sites scattered throughout Montana. But as part of the arrangement signed Wednesday hammered out by state and federal officials, lawyers and a Texas bankruptcy court, the ownership of Asarco's land is now in the hands of the Montana Environmental Trust Group.

That organization will use \$138 million to try to remove the contamination and sell the property at the direction of state, federal and local organizations. An additional \$39.5 million went directly to the state as compensation for natural resource damage, and will be used to repair environments tainted by Asarco.

"We think it's enough money — obviously, we would have liked more but we got more through this process than anybody predicted we would," Gov. Brian Schweitzer said on Wednesday. "I was resistant to some other offers, but I spent the last five years squeezing them harder than a dinner roll and we think we got every penny out of them we could."

He noted that they'll be able to move forward faster on remediation now that Asarco no longer is holding the purse strings and the state knows how much money it has to work with. Schweitzer said the settlement also is an opportunity to put people to work.

"These are great jobs for heavy equipment operators, engineers, soil scientists, welders, electricians. And what can be better for Montanans, to work good jobs with good benefits doing work that will make Montana's landscape a better place?" he asked.

Others believe Asarco is walking away too easily from a century of environmental degradation.

"It just goes to show you that nothing lasts forever except heavy metals," said Anne Hedges with the Montana Environmental Information Center. "Corporations come and go, but the heavy metals never leave."

Yet all agree that it's time to move on and look toward the future.

In East Helena, \$100 million will go into the Environmental Trust to be used to treat lead-contaminated soils on land formerly owned by Asarco, which reverted to the trust under Wednesday's settlement; to run a water treatment on the former lead smelting plant site in perpetuity; and to try to treat arsenic and selenium in groundwater that is flowing off of the plant site toward the Helena Valley. Another \$5.8 million was given directly to the state to be used to restore natural resources damaged by the company.

Dealing with some of the former Asarco properties, such as ranches around East Helena that the company purchased because they were too contaminated to run cattle on, should be fairly easy, officials noted. They anticipate either replacing the soils or deep-tilling them so they're mixed with enough clean soil that the lead is diluted and the properties can be sold and developed.

State and federal officials are looking at various options for the actual plant site, which is heavily contaminated with lead and arsenic from the smelting process. They may just cap the site with a barrier that prevents water from seeping into the soils, and it may be useable for another industrial type of business.

Dealing with the underground water plumes could prove much trickier. Early estimates for treatment were in the \$50 million range, and EPA officials have said they may never be able to clean it sufficiently and may have to create a zone where wells aren't allowed.

Chuck Figur, an EPA spokesman in Denver, said they're still monitoring the plumes and working with various agencies to come

up with a plan on how to handle the tainted water, which in some places has arsenic levels so high that two eight-ounce glasses would kill an adult.

Under the settlement, Asarco also put \$10 million into the Environmental Trust for the Mike Horse Mine site east of Lincoln. Another \$23 million was given directly to the state for work on the project.

At the Mike Horse Mine, water contaminated with heavy metals that flows out of the mine's adit already is being treated as part of a system Asarco built. That discharge is expected to need cleansing forever, with the water draining into the famed Blackfoot River.

Next to the mine sits a large earthen impoundment, or dam, that holds back thousands of gallons of water drained from the nearby mountainsides via Beartrap Creek, one of the headwaters of the Blackfoot River. The dam blew out in 1975, and heavy metals from the soils ran downstream, killing aquatic life for miles in the river.

After recent studies showed that the replacement dam was failing, Asarco, state and federal agencies worked together to divert Beartrap Creek around the impoundment in 2007, using \$16 million from Asarco and the Atlantic Richfield Company. Once the water was drained, they planned to remove about 500,000 cubic yards of soils and tailings contaminated with heavy metals.

However, while water levels fell after the diversion, springs from the mountainsides refilled the pool in 2008, according to Beth Ihle, a Helena National Forest geologist. So last spring, the state Department of Environmental Quality dug a trench and installed a pump to try to dewater the tailings enough to remove them.

Ihle said the original idea was to get the infrastructure in place this summer for a large-scale removal and to start working with the tailings, but now they're trying to figure out how to dry the soils enough that they're manageable and that heavy equipment won't sink into them in the narrow, V-shaped valley.

At the inactive Black Pine Mine north of Phillipsburg, the state's DEQ is taking the lead in cleanup work. Wednesday's settlement put aside \$17.5 million for the 1,300-acre site.

Warren McCullough, the DEQ's environmental management bureau chief, said historic mining activities left a lot of mercury, and the state may need to install a water treatment system similar to that at the Mike Horse Mine, and plans to remove contaminated soils, waste rocks and tailings.

The Iron Mountain Mine and Mill, which operated on and off from 1909 until 1953, received \$1.9 million to be put into the Environmental Trust; another \$2 million was directed for natural resource work.

The contamination is considered widespread through the nearby town of Superior, where residents used mine tailings as fill in their yards and even on the high school track.

The 80-acre site was declared a state Superfund site, and in 2002, the EPA sent a team to Superior to clean the track and other tailings deposits. It was declared a federal Superfund site last September.

The state received \$8.3 million directly to be used to help clean up the Barker Hughesille site southeast of Great Falls. Forty-six abandoned mines dot the area, which was placed on the National Priorities List in 2001, and work is ongoing to cap and consolidate the tailings.

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